

On crediting your collaborator



Dancer and choreographer James Vu Anh Pham discusses how teaching keeps you fresh in low-creative seasons and the moment he knew he needed to find representation to support his work

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As told to Cat Woods, 1823 words.

Tags: [Dance](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Mentorship](#).

So you're currently in Melbourne to visit family? Tell me how you balance time for leisure and personal relationships with time spent working, because I know that you're teaching workshops around Australia at the moment.

Oh no, I'm actually in Sydney, but then I'll go to Melbourne next week. Right now is quite a rare moment where I have nothing on, or I've just chosen to not take anything on that's a bit more long-term on because I know that we have a bunch of large projects coming next year. So, I've been quite adamant about keeping this time quite free, and it's also a nice way to reconnect the community by doing some classes here and there.

For me, teaching is still a very social thing, but at the same time, it still lets me remain fit and active so I don't let myself go too much. I don't necessarily feel like it's work, because I actually enjoy teaching a lot. At the same time, there's still a creative element to it. So yeah, that for me is something that is really important to keep a little bit of that flow happening, even if I'm having time off.

I love that. Can you tell me what you can reveal about what you're doing in 2026? I think you've got FKA twigs that I know of, that tour, but do you know of any videos, tours that are already planned ahead of time?

Yeah, right now we've definitely announced a lot of dates for the [FKA twigs] Body High Tour, which I'm really excited to be a part of. So, I think we start rehearsals quite soon.

In terms of anything outside of that, anything that's not been announced, I can't really speak about, but the tour I'm really looking forward to. The cast will pretty much be the same [as previous tours] somewhat. It just feels like we're having a reunion. Now we're just all having a bit of time off before the games begin.

What is the period of that tour?

I think the dates range from March till August.

How long have you been working with FKA twigs? Because it looks like a couple of years, is that right?

Yeah, I think it's probably about two years now. It definitely feels like it's been a lot longer, we've just done so many things. I had this chat with her the other day, actually, and I thought it was one year, but she was like, "Oh, I think it's actually two." Something like that.

It's funny, because even just watching the videos or looking at social media and watching the performances from

afar, you both seem to be on a wavelength. You appear to have a similar approach to dance. Did you meet on that wavelength, or did it take some negotiating to find a shared dance language?

[FKA twigs] is very much a dancer, and she's had her own path and development in that way, and that is very much the same as me. She has also trained in ballet and contemporary, so there's a lot of similarities in our training for dance.

I think, creatively, we really connect in a lot of ways. There's a lot of nuanced back and forth and a sense of real collaboration and openness to each other's ideas. I really appreciate how much she trusts me creatively.

We'd done a music video together and a live performance together, and I was there as a dancer first. Then she asked me to come on board as a choreographer for a campaign for On. And from that point, I was like, "Oh, okay. I would love to do something like that." And then it just picked up from there.

On that project, it was just me and her in the studio, and so we really got to connect in a much more intimate space creatively. Yeah, there was just such a beautiful flow, I think.

I think it takes a lot of trust. Is that your experience?

Yeah, absolutely. I've also been a teacher for a long time as well. I've been teaching since maybe over 10 years now. I've done the smaller groups, I've done larger groups, and so I've been able to learn how to understand energetically where I need to be in a space. I think each group requires something very different of me energetically.

So, sharing ideas and being creative with twigs, leading up to it, I was quite nervous. But then, once we actually got into the studio and just started working on the craft, it felt very natural because it was something very familiar to me.

I love that. Please knock on some wood-I will be-but an injury is a real liability for a dancer's career, so I'm wondering what you do to prevent injury and plan ahead for it and care for your body. And do you think about that as a professional obligation?

I'm always planning out a lead-up training regime before a job, especially if a job is a bit more of a long-term contract. Say, for example, right now, I know I need to be really physical from maybe the end of January. Since two weeks ago, I've started going to the gym a lot more and doing my own Pilates and yoga.

Because I've been doing that for so long throughout my career, I know exactly what I need to do to condition my body to prevent any kinds of injuries. Injuries are always going to be somehow inevitable. I've seen it happen so much around me. Thankfully, I've never had a major injury. I've never had to miss out on a show or anything throughout my entire career.

So I feel like I've been very lucky, but at the same time, I've also worked very hard to maintain that. Obviously, there are things that are very out of your control, but I'm also hyper-aware of my surroundings, and I just don't take those kinds of risks, especially the older I get as well.

I think the first maybe five years of my career in my early 20s, I was a lot more reckless, but I still remember being very hyper-aware and fixated on potential hazards and things.

Are dancing and choreography very different roles, or is it a very natural process for you to switch between them?

The first part of my career as just a dancer actually required me to be very collaborative in the studio. So, actually, the choreographers that I worked for, many of them would ask me to create solos and material that I would eventually perform as a dancer within their piece. I was very happy to do this in the earlier part of my

career, and it was very much the culture within concert contemporary dance.

Later on in my career, when I realized how much I was creating and generating material-wise, I was like, "Hang on a minute, I'm actually doing the coach's job." And then at some point, I think there was a bit of a movement within the dance culture that was like, "Hey, so if you're a choreographer, make sure you also choreograph some steps. Really do the thing! Do your job and don't just take from your dancers, and don't just exploit your dancers to create all the movement for you, because then you're just directing. You're not actually choreographing, which is fine, but just make sure you credit the dancers accordingly."

When I started moving more into the commercial realm as a dancer, there were agents involved, and agents are able to have these discussions more directly with production. So, then you would be credited accordingly, and you would be paid accordingly. And so from that switch, I was like, "Okay, well, I guess in a way I've been flexing my choreography muscles for a long time." And slowly and very organically, I started getting more choreographic opportunities.

I'm wondering at what point in your career you got a manager and how much of a difference it made in terms of that manager taking on admin tasks and contract discussions so that you could focus on what you want to do, which is that creative side of things.

I signed with my agent, Ben at Box Artist Management, three years ago when I booked Madonna's tour. And at that point, I knew that I needed to have an agent, because I knew from that point on I would be around or involved with much larger-scale productions, and that would have required a lot of negotiating and conversation, because each job would be very different from the previous one.

Being able to have Ben take over, and also for him to be able to believe in me and to support me and put me forward, not just as a dancer, but as a choreographer, for specific kinds of jobs that I would not have been in contact with if I didn't work with him, that's been the biggest difference.

Also, for him to have seen my work from a distance for a couple of years and to already have noticed me and to have already believed in me from a while back, that just gave me a really good boost to be like, "Okay, let's move to the next era. Let's push a little bit harder. Let's get things flowing in a different way." Because to be honest, before that, the work that I was doing was only contemporary concert dance. I didn't really need an agent for those kinds of jobs.

Did you always feel like you could express yourself in terms of fashion, hair, body art, piercings, whatever it might be, especially if you're auditioning for various jobs that might want to mold you to their vision?

I'm a double Taurus. I'm incredibly stubborn and headstrong in what I believe I want to do and how I want to do it, and it needs to be done in my time. That has deterred me away from jobs that would have molded me in a way that I didn't think was going to benefit me.

I feel really lucky and, at the same time, have worked incredibly hard to get to the place where I am today in terms of having the luxury of being able to turn a job down if I'm not that interested in it, or I'm feeling lucky enough to be in a place to an extent where I can pick and choose a bit if it aligns with me.

James Vu Anh Pham recommends:

Training and prepping my mind and body for the artistic year ahead.

Kissing cute people.

Spending more time alone.

Telling people I love that I love them.

Practicing asserting my boundaries clearly.

Name

James Vu Anh Pham

Vocation

Dancer, choreographer

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